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Kremlin Succession Underlines Enigmas For U.S. Intelligence

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WASHINGTON, Dec. 22 — United States Government officials said today that the naming of Marshal Sergei L. Sokolov as the new Soviet Defense Minister underscored the difficulty of forecasting the highly secret decisions of the Soviet leadership.

Analysts in the State Department and Central Intelligence Agency said Friday that the front-runner to succeed Marshal Dmitri F. Ustinov as Defense Minister appeared to be Grigory V. Romanov, a member of the ruling Communist Party Politburo who had been chief of the Leningrad Communist Party. Similar speculation was voiced by Western diplomats in Moscow.

The erroneous forecast about Mr. Romanov seemed to underscore a complaint often made by senior policy-makers about the Government's inability to pierce the inner workings of the Soviet Politburo and Secretariat.

A month ago many American analysts said that if Marshal Ustinov, who was then reported to be seriously ill, died soon, he would be replaced by Marshal Sokolov. Marshal Sokolov, as First Deputy Defense Minister, had been substituting for Marshal Ustinov at occasions on which the Defense Minister's presence was required.

But on Friday these officials revised their views. They said the choice of Mr. Romanov to head Marshal Ustinov's funeral commission was evidence that he would probably succeed the Defense Minister. One senior analyst said that "Sokolov was always on my list," but he acknowledged that he was persuaded Friday that Mr. Romanov would get the job.

Western forecasts about successions in the Kremlin are usually made on the basis of such surface factors as historical precedent, public remarks and appearances, and only rarely on direct information.

Marshal Ustinov was head of the funeral commission for his predecessor, Marshal Andrei A. Grechko, who died in 1976. Marshal Grechko, in turn, was head of the funeral commission when his predecessor, Marshal Rodion Y. Malinovsky, died in 1967.

The analysts also noted that Yuri V. Andropov was head of the funeral commission for his predecessor, Leonid I. Brezhnev. Konstantin U. Chernenko

was head of the funeral commission for Mr. Andropov and was then named to replace him as the top Soviet leader.

Speaking today of Mr. Romanov's role in the Ustinov funeral, one American official said, "I guess the reason he headed the funeral commission was that they wanted a Politburo member to be in charge of the commission for another Politburo member," noting that both men were members of the Communist Party policy-making body that is the effective Cabinet.

Choice of Civilian Expected

The analysts said they had viewed Mr. Romanov as the likely choice for Defense Minister because they believed the Soviet Union would continue naming civilians to the post, as was done in 1976 when Mr. Ustinov, a civilian, was given the military rank of marshal as he took over what had traditionally been a position reserved for a career military officer.

The Washington Soviet-watchers had also said that if Mr. Romanov went to the Defense Ministry that would have, in effect, taken him out of contention as a successor to Mr. Chernenko, the 73-year-old Soviet leader, leaving Mikhail S. Gorbachev, 53, as the chief heir apparent with little or no competition.

Only three of the eleven current

members of the Politburo also are national party secretaries, members of the Communist Party Secretariat, the executive organ that runs the day-to-day affairs of the Soviet Union. Marshal Ustinov was a member of the Politburo but not of the Secretariat.

Succession Precedents

The three men who are members of both groups are Mr. Romanov, Mr. Gorbachev and Mr. Chernenko, the General Secretary of the party. Had Mr. Romanov become Defense Minister, he would have been expected to give up his post as a national party secretary. Since no one has become the General Secretary, the supreme Soviet leader, without first having been a national party secretary, this could have had important ramifications.

"We have to assume that he has ambitions for the top," a State Department official said of Mr. Romanov. The experts agreed today that Mr. Gorbachev, who made a favorable impression on British leaders during his visit to London, is still the leading candidate to replace Mr. Chernenko if the Soviet leader is forced to step down soon. But they said Mr. Romanov, who has been in charge of military industries, would have to be considered a contender.